DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 237 240 PS 013 997

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TITLE Preschool Teachers' Reactions to Attractive and Unattractive Children: An Observational Study.
PUB DATE Mar 83
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southwestern Psychological Association (San Antonio, TX, April 21-23, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attention; Feedback; *Interpersonal Attraction; Physical Activity Level; *Physical Characteristics; *Preschool Children; Preschool Education; *Preschool Teachers; Social Networks; *Student Behavior; *Teacher Behavior
IDENTIFIERS *Physical Attractiveness

ABSTRACT

Teacher's behavior toward preschool children varying in attractiveness and children's behavior toward their teachers were investigated. Participating were 64 preschool children and 9 teachers. Children, who attended a private preschool in Houston, Texas, were white, equally divided by sex and age, and from middle-income homes. A group of 30 adult raters determined the attractiveness of the children prior to data collection by rating standard posed photographs of the children. Nine student behaviors judged of interest were categorized as teacher/nonteacher directed, positive/negative, and proximal/physical. Teacher behaviors falling within five response categories were evaluated as positive, negative, or neutral. Observations were made during unstructured play times by 10 undergraduate observers trained in the use of a behavioral checklist; teachers were unaware that they were being observed. Results indicated that behavioral differences do seem to exist between attractive and unattractive children; specifically, unattractive subjects showed higher activity levels. In addition, teachers appeared to react more favorably to children rated as attractive than to those rated unattractive. (RH)

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PS 013997

Preschool Teachers' Reactions to Attractive and Unattractive Children: An Observational Study

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Much of the attention now given to the role of attractiveness in child development began as a result of work by Karen Dion. That is, her early work in the 1970's provided the basic, seminal evidence that children were evaluated differently on the basis of attractiveness. One of the cornerstones of this early research was a study in which teachers were asked to evaluate children on the basis of a conduct report. Without teachers' knowledge, level of children's attractiveness also varied. Dion's work demonstrated without question that teachers held very different expectations and offered differential evaluations for attractive and unattractive children. Later research by Gerald Adams and Elaine Walster has confirmed Dion's earlier work.

Probably the most important unanswered question in the area, however, is the extent to which teachers actually respond differently to attractive and unattractive children in a natural context, especially after some period of interaction.

From a social network perspective, evidence that teachers actually differentially socialize children on the basis of attractiveness would place teachers as very important socializers in the attractiveness-based socialization process. A recent theoretical formulation by Langlois and Stephan (1981) leads us to suspect that teachers do show such differential treatment.

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Specifically, Langlois and Stephan (1981) argue for a strong link between behavioral expectations and actual differential treatment of attractive and unattractive children by adults. Their view is premised on the notion that attractive and unattractive children elicit these differential responses from socializers.

The present study, then, was directed at teachers' actual behaviors exhibited toward children varying in attractiveness in a natural context. We were also interested in children's positive and negative behaviors in this environment. That is, Langlois and Downs (1979) discovered that attractive and unattractive preschoolers actually exhibited differing levels of positive and negative behaviors, and varying rates of activity when playing with peers in a semi-controlled environment. Thus, our study examined these behaviors in a natural context and further, investigated teachers' responses to these behaviors.

Sixty-four preschoolers, half boys and half girls were included for study. The children were equally divided by age, half age 3 and half age 5 years, and all of the children represented white, middle-income-level homes. The children were familiar with their teachers at the time of data collection. Incidently, this degree of familiarity could be expected to have an effect in the sense of diminishing the chances of obtaining results. That is, we suspected that teachers who knew children well might exhibit fewer attractiveness-based responses. However, any differences in teachers' responses would seem to

be far more enduring and believable than during initial encounters between children and teachers at the beginning of the school year.

Children were drawn from the classrooms of nine female teachers in a large private preschool in Houston. The attractiveness levels of the children in the study were determined prior to data collection by ratings of standard posed photos of the children by a group of 30 adult raters. From a larger pool of subjects, those who were higher and lower in attractiveness on the 1-7 attractiveness rating scale were included in the present study.

Observations of the children were made by 10 undergraduate observers who were unaware of the purpose of the study and who were extensively trained to observe children and teachers using a behavioral checklist. All observations were conducted in classrooms during unstructured play times. Teachers were unaware that they were being observed. Observer reliability was high both before and during data collection on all behaviors coded, with the lowest reliability between pairs of raters = .70. Observers were instructed to remain in the corner of the classroom and to not interact with children or teachers. Each child and teacher were observed simultaneously by two observers. Observers watched for 10 seconds and then recorded observations for 5 seconds. Each teacher-child pair was observed for a total of 10 minutes.

The Behavior Checklist

The Behavior Checklist consisted of nine child behavior categories and five teacher responses. Teacher response categories were based on teacher and parent response categories to child behaviors in checklists developed by Beverly Fagot (1969, 1977, 1974) Teacher responses were either positive, negative or neutral.

Child behavior categories to measure attention-getting behaviors were developed for this study by the authors. Of the nine child behavior categories, four were labeled "non-teacher directed" and five "teacher directed". Categories were further divided into positive and negative, and again into behavioral and verbal. In the "teacher directed" category, a "proximal/physical" category was also added.

Observers were requested to learn the checklists as thoroughly as possible and to refer to them constantly while recording observations. In instances when a "behavioral" and a "verbal" behavior or teacher response occured simultaneously, observers were instructed to record the "verbal" category. In other instances when two behaviors occured during the same 10 second interval, observers were instructed to record both behaviors with appropriate responses.

Results

First, let's examine children's behaviors and differences found for these behaviors on the basis of attractiveness. 2 x 2 x 2 (Age, Sex, Attractiveness) analyses of variance on the simple frequencies of children's behaviors revealed several main effects for attractiveness.

1. Unattractive children exhibited higher frequencies of overall non-teacher-directed behavior than attractive children. This finding seems to confirm Langlois and Downs' (1979) earlier finding that unattractive children exhibit higher rates of behavior than attractive children.

2. Attractive children exhibited higher rates of teacher-directed behavior than unattractive children. However, this difference was accounted for primarily by older, 5-year-old, attractive girls. Namely, these girls showed much higher frequencies of positive behavioral and verbal teacher-directed behaviors and proximal behaviors than their unattractive counterparts.

But, what of teachers' reactions to these behaviors? Let's look at teachers' responses to each class of child behaviors and then look at the overall pattern for teachers.

1. When children exhibited non-teacher-directed positive behavior several differences emerged. Unattractive children received more negative verbal reactions than attractive children. This was especially true for unattractive boys. In contrast, attractive girls received more positive verbal reactions than unattractive girls.

2. When children showed non-teacher directed negative behavior only one difference surfaced: unattractive three-year-old boys received more negative verbal reactions than attractive three-year-old boys.

3. When children's non-teacher-directed verbal behavior was positive attractive children received slightly higher amounts of positive verbal and behavioral reactions compared with unattractive children, but the differences were only barely significant at the .05 level.

4. When children exhibited negative verbal non-teacher directed behavior, unattractive children got slightly higher negative verbal reactions.

Overall, then, when children showed non-teacher directed behaviors such as simple play, teachers were somewhat more likely to respond positively to attractive children, especially girls, and negatively to unattractive children, especially boys.

When we examine children's teacher-directed behaviors, even more differences emerged.

5. When children's teacher-directed behaviors were positive teachers responded much more positively to attractive three-year-old girls and to all attractive boys than to their unattractive peers.

6. When teacher-directed verbal behaviors were positive the only difference emerged among 3-year-old girls wherein attractive girls received more positive verbal reactions than unattractive girls.

7. When children's teacher-directed behavior or verbalizations were negative, no differences based on attractive in teachers' responses were present.

8. Finally, when children exhibited proximity-seeking behavior large differences existed only in response to 5-year-old girls: attractive girls received far more positive verbal reactions than unattractive girls.

Admittedly, we've just gone over quite a few findings, and they may be somewhat difficult to digest in so short a presentation. Let me briefly summarize them at this point. When children are simply playing and not interacting with their teachers, attractive children receive far more favorable feedback from teachers than unattractive children. When children direct their attention to teachers, such as in the form of a request for help or a smile, attractive children were slightly more likely to receive positive attention than unattractive children. The bottom line of the findings seem to be that behavioral differences do seem to exist between attractive and unattractive children wherein unattractive children show higher activity levels and teachers appear to react more favorably to attractive, compared with unattractive, children. It would seem likely then, following Langlois and Downs' (1979) earlier work, that unattractive children show greater activity levels in order to gain some attention since teachers' attention and positive reactions appear to favor attractive children.

This study yields confirmatory evidence that the behavioral differences expected by teachers are translated into differential reactions by teachers toward attractive and unattractive children. From a social network perspective, teachers are probably playing a very important role in the attractiveness-based socialization process. Additional research, preferably of a longitudinal nature, is needed which unravels the bi-directionality of teachers' and children's responses. That is, the question still remains as to whether existing differences in children's attractiveness levels and behaviors elicit differences in teachers' behaviors or conversely, do teachers' reactions to attractive and unattractive children promote the observed differences between attractive and unattractive children.